

The Healing of the Man Born Blind

New Testament scholar N.T Wright compared Scripture to a five-act play, full of drama and surprise, wherein the people of God are invited into the story to improvise the unfinished final act. “Our ability to faithfully execute our roles in the drama depends on our willingness to enter the narrative”, he said, “to see how our own stories intersect with the grander epic of God’s redemption of the world.”

The act of preaching is exactly that: an effort on the part of the preacher to see how our own stories intersect with the epic of God’s interaction with the world. Also preachers tend to imply how it is that they access this intersection.

I would like to tell you one of the ways that I have learned to “hear” Scripture.

When my eldest son got his first electronic device on which he could download and then consume his self-selected content, it was a big thing. I was one of those moms who limited screen time and pretty much knew what was coming into my house in terms of influences and input.

So, you can imagine my dismay when I walk into his room one night to say good-night and instead of him reading a book before bed, as he had his whole life, he was listening to something through airbuds. “What are you listening to?” I asked, in a probing way. “Comedy, “ was his response. “Comedy?” “Yes, Mom. There is nothing better in this world than to go to sleep laughing.”

He rapidly converted all of us to his favorite comedy routines and comedians. Soon we too were listening, repeating, memorizing

comedy. It became part of our family culture, the lens through which we saw the world. On the trip to Virginia, moving to Seminary, it was comedy that took us from state to state and calmed our nerves. It was comedy that we imbibed and let carry us. We did not have to say whole paragraphs to each other anymore: one phrase and we were in the middle of Brian Reagan talking about little league baseball or the directions for cooking pop-tarts....and the smiles and the laughter would follow.

For me, as a student of Scripture, comedy taught me something. It taught me to listen for, anticipate, identify, savor, and enjoy the punchline. Often, during my first read-through of a passage, what jumps out to me is the one “punchline waiting for a joke.” In so many gospel stories there is one line on which the whole story depends, one moment, one insight, one movement, one commentary. So it is with the Healing of the Man Born Blind. The line for

me in this story is when the man asks the Pharisees: “Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?” I can almost hear a pin drop in the room as Silence pervades the temple. This is one of those lines that invokes a reaction.

This man is talking to the Pharisees. He has already explained how his sight was restored and they ask him to tell the story again: “Why do you want to hear my story again, the one about the spitting and the mud, the mud on my eyes, the washing, and my seeing? Why, do you, teachers of the law, leaders in the temple, guardians of the faith, why do you want to hear the story again?” The real truth gets revealed here: the Pharisees are more interested in keeping the letter of the law, more interested in who is in and who is out, more interested in sinfulness, than they are in healing.

That is so sad, actually, and this attitude of caring more about sin than about healing prompts Jesus' assessment of them that comes at the end of the story: "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains."

I mentioned how my family loves to see the world through the lens of comedy. The coronavirus, however, is no laughing matter. People losing their lives, their loved ones, their livelihoods, is not an occasion for mirth. In fact, I have never heard any jokes about the Spanish Flu or the plague, or any other global pandemic. We cannot take it lightly. We can't gather on the beach for Spring Break. We can't let our kids have playdates. We can't drink beer and eat nachos while watching the Final Four. No, there is no comedy here.

But what there is here, in the story we hear today, is this invitation: are we going to be

more interested in healing or are we going to be interested in who is right, who is wrong, who is a sinner? If we are online at all, we are seeing the articles that are asking hard questions that are connected to the pandemic in which we find ourselves; questions around ecological priorities, the environment and the appearance of a super-virus; questions around economic insecurity and economic disparity; articles about appreciating all the hidden servants of the world: the teachers, the grocery-store employees, the medical professionals, the sanitation workers, the farmers, the utility company employees. Even though the medical implications of the virus are our first thought, these other revelations are things that cannot go ignored. It is as if the virus is the mud on our eyes and as we wash off in the rivers of integrity and faith, we see things that we have not seen before. We have stopped being blind and we can see so many things the way that they really are.

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This virus is giving us an opportunity not to be blind anymore, but to see. Seeing is sometimes shocking. In fact, this seeing: seeing what a viral pandemic can do, seeing what might have caused it, seeing who are essential to fight it, seeing its ripple effects economically and socially, is causing all of us a lot of suffering. One of the problems with this coronavirus situation is that we are seeing things both too quickly and not quickly enough. There is a lot of fear, a lot of uncertainty, a lot of wondering about the world shifting and where it will land. This is normal human reaction.

But/and let's notice something about our gospel story today. After the man who was

healed gets kicked out of the temple, Jesus hears about it and goes to find him, to comfort him, to gather him, to bring him into the folds of his followers. Jesus is not only interested in healing him, but in supporting him, walking beside him as he enters this now seeing life.

This is true for us in this non-comedic time of the corona virus. We are seeing and knowing things that we may not have seen before. Our eyes are open. We are seeing. Let us be assured that God knows what it is that we are seeing and how hard it is that we are seeing it. Be assured that, like Jesus going to the man born blind who can now see, Jesus is coming to us, inviting us to see him for who he is, seeing life for how it is and is inviting us, once again, to be with him, cared for by him, part of the gang.

Lettie sent me something last week from Indigenous elder and retired Episcopal Bishop, Steven Charleston. To me, it is an affirmation

that Jesus is by our side in this new vision of the world, when our blindness has been taken away.

Listen to what he says:

Now is the time for which our faith has prepared us. Now is the moment when all that we believe can be put to work. Now we can turn to the inner resources we have been developing over these many years to face the challenge of a world in desperate need. We are not afraid of this crisis for we have been made ready for it. We have devoted our lives to the belief that something greater than fear or disease guides human history. We have studied, prayed and grown in the Spirit. Now we come to the call to use what we believe. Our people need hope, confidence, courage and compassion: the very things for which we have been trained. We are the calm in the midst of a storm. Stand your ground and let your light so shine that others may see it and find their faith as well.

This is caring more about healing than fear. This is caring more about healing than about sin. This is caring. Amen and Amen.